

## Parting Gifts by Nomad1

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**Summary:** Everyone else might be leaving, but Mike still has work to do.

## Parting Gifts

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### Parting Gifts

That day when Mike got home from the Neibolt Church School he put his books in the parlour and went into the kitchen to make himself a snack. His mom had gone to see about getting some more twine from the Costello Avenue Market so she could finish up dressing the old scarecrows, so there was no one there to exclaim in horror if he added onions to his peanut butter sandwich.

He stood and ate it from the countertop as he read the note his dad had left for him. Now spring was here his list of chores around the farm had grown longer, and he knew he'd better get started on hoeing the south field right away if he wanted to be done before dinner. He rubbed his hands clean of crumbs on his corduroys - another thing that would make his mother throw her hands up in dismay, though why it should make a difference when he was about to go out into the muddy fields he'd never quite understood - and poured a glass of lemonade to take outside with him. He knew if he went inside for a break when he was halfway through it would be hard to drag himself back out again.

His dad had left the A parked up in the high grass behind the house, and Mike set the glass of lemonade down on the tailgate. A makeshift repair made from the old henhouse door, it had to be tied up with string if you wanted it upright, but it made a plenty steady table when it was down, provided you didn't try to sit on it. He looked around for where he'd left the hoe.

And saw a stranger watching him from the shadows beside the house.

Mike flinched back in shock, his heart racing. The man was leaning up against the corner of the house, hat pulled down to overshadow his face, and he was thin, impossibly thin. His torn shirt flapped open around his pale ribs, and for a moment Mike was sure that he was looking at a walking corpse.

Then he blinked again and realised it was just a scarecrow, propped up against the side of the building where his mom must have left it, halfway through the job of dressing it up. He should have seen that the strange mix of raggedy old clothes was something only a (*clown*) scarecrow would wear. The hat was pulled down low because it had no proper head to rest on, and the hollow ribs were no more than a trick of the torn old scrap of bedsheet that his mom had tucked around its neck to make a scarf.

All the same, he stared at it a little while longer, just to make extra doubly certain *sure* it wouldn't move. Sometimes here in Derry it was worth taking not just a second look but a third one. Sometimes here in Derry it was the reassuring second glance that told you it was just imagination that turned out to be the one that was horribly wrong.

There had been no more murders since the summer of 1958; nothing big that Mike had spotted in his new habit of reading the papers or overheard from grown-ups whispering behind closed doors. But sometimes among the kids there were still rumours passed around: dumb little scary stories of things someone had seen or thought they had, like echoes in the aftermath of the big explosion.

*It's sleeping*, he thought, without really being aware that he was thinking it. *Sleeping, and it isn't time to wake up yet, but if it's sleeping it can dream... and if it can dream, then maybe it can roll over and swat you in its sleep.*

But regardless, there were certain facts of life here on the farm, and one was that the fields had to be hoed. And hoed. And hoed.

It was miserable work in the hot sun. Mike was too tall now to keep using the old hoe with the broken-off handle that he'd used when he was younger, but the full-sized one his father wielded started to get heavy by the end of the first row. The return trip down the second row was much slower, and Mike fixed his eyes on the back of the truck where he'd set his reward. He could practically taste the lemonade on his lips as he dragged his way down the final stretch; maybe a little warm by now, but it would still be ambrosia to his parched throat, dry and sticky from his earlier sandwich. Just a little more to go...

(It would not have occurred to him that he could have just thrown down the hoe and gone to get the drink any time he wanted without waiting to reach his self-appointed goal, any more than it would have occurred to him to just outright skip any of the chores left on his father's list.)

At last Mike finally reached the end of the second row, and wiping his forehead with his arm he went back to the truck to claim his prize. As he took his first gulp from the glass, he heard a low and terrible groan from the side of the house.

Though the lemonade had indeed started to grow warm in the sun, he felt cold all the way down to his toes. He grabbed hold of the tailgate of the truck for support, and it gave an unhappy creak. As if in answer, the thing around the corner moaned again, a horrible yet somehow also mournful sound, like a creature in pain.

*It's a mooseblower, he thought. Just a cut-off can with a waxed string for a tongue. Dad must have tied one to the scarecrow round there already.*

And yet another part of him knew that it was the scarecrow itself, moaning in angry pain as its stuffed straw guts spilled out, dragging itself across the grass so it could rip *his* stuffing out and show him how it felt. His fingers were pressed so tight against the lemonade glass that it almost squeezed out of his sweaty hand. He could see a spindly shadow stretching around the corner...

There was the jingle of a bicycle bell somewhere down the hill. Mike turned his head halfway towards the sound by pure instinct, and when he snapped it back the scarecrow's shadow was no longer there. Either it had never been more than his imagination to begin with, or it had been scared off by the arrival of more prey than it could yet handle.

He heard the crunch of bicycle tyres coming up the hill towards the farm. His first thought was (*hi-yo Silver AWAYYYY*) Big Bill, but Bill was long gone, the first of their group to move away from Derry. Mike had tried to phone him once, and he'd been friendly but vague, like a distant relative trying to remember exactly which one of the many cousins he'd palled around with as a kid he might be talking to now.

It wasn't Bill, but as it turned out, nor was it Randy Robinson or one of the other boys from the Church School. It was Beverly Marsh, riding a too-small rust red bike with a basket on the front. It was the first time he could remember her coming out to the farm, though he'd seen her in the town from time to time, coming back from the Aladdin with Richie once or twice or strolling through Bassey Park with an ice-cream.

She rode up to the gate, and where she stopped with her feet on the pedals Mike saw that her skirt was hiked up, revealing a little more bare leg than it was supposed to do. He took another quick gulp of the lemonade as he went to meet her. "Hi," he said, feeling suddenly awkward. His voice had gotten to shifting up and down unpredictably sometimes lately, and while Bev was once someone he could have laughed over that with, right now it made him strangely shy.

"Hi, Mike." Bev leaned forward to rest on the bike's handlebars and that solved the skirt problem but kind of created a baggy sweater problem to take its place. "Are you busy?" she asked.

"I got chores, but I guess I'm on a break." He shifted his feet, feeling goofy and uncertain. He'd never had girls come up to visit him at home before. It was somehow different to having Randy drop by, or even one of the others from the Losers' Club. "Um, you want some lemonade?" he said.

"Sure," she said, and leaned over and grabbed his hand to take a drink right out of the other side of his glass. As she let him go she giggled at the look on his face, and just like that it was magically easy again.

"So what are you doing all the way out here?" he asked, turning to sit on the fence post beside her.

"Just came by to say hi, I guess." But there was a melancholy note as she sat back on the bike, and after a moment she went on. "Richie's parents are moving away. He told me they want to move somewhere that he can go to a good high school."

"Yeah." But it was funny how the Toziers had somehow never thought

of that before; funny how it seemed almost as if some invisible hand that had been holding the seven of them and their families in place had loosened to let them all drift away like balloons. "I heard Stan's family moved to New York," he said.

After Bill, he hadn't tried so hard to get in touch with Stan. He had a feeling that Stanley Uris had been working on forgetting everything that happened in the summer of '58 long before he and his family had left the state.

"And Ben's mom lost her job up at Stark's Mills," Beverly said morosely. "They had to go stay with his aunt." She hesitated. "And... I guess my mom's been talking about maybe taking a job in Bangor, and Dad following us up there when he can find work." Her eyes flickered away from his as she smoothed out her skirt. "But that's just an idea," she added hastily.

Somehow Mike had a feeling that it was more than that, that this would probably be the last time he saw Beverly Marsh before she was gone too. And what about Eddie? It gave him a guilty twinge to realise that he honestly didn't have a clue if Eddie and his mom were still in town or they'd already left. He wasn't sure it made much difference either way. They were all drifting apart, forgetting and moving away, and soon Mike would be the last one left, just as he'd been the last to join their group.

The others might go, but he would still be here. The Hanlon family were tied to the land by their farm. And maybe... well, maybe there wasn't so much point to them leaving as there was for the others. Maybe it was better to stay here in a town that was hateful to everyone than leave it for one that hated them alone.

"We should get together with Richie and Eddie and go see a movie or something before he leaves," he said.

"We should," Bev said, but Mike already knew that it wouldn't happen. He had his chores to do around the farm, and then there would be band practice for the Fourth of July parade, and those few days he was free there would be some reason why one of the others couldn't be... And then one day Richie would just be gone, as Bill and Stan and Ben had left with barely a ripple before him, as Bev and

Eddie would surely go soon after.

Maybe Bev knew it too, because the smile that she gave him was somehow an adult smile, knowing and fond and a little bit sad. As she rose up on the pedals ready to cycle off, she leaned over the gate and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "See you around, Mike," she said.

"Bet your fur," he said, and he was sure the same sort of smile was on his face as he watched her go.

He finished the last of the lemonade as she disappeared down the hill. Strange to know how much he would miss her, how much he already missed them all, when really they'd only spent that one brief heady span of weeks together. And yet part of him thought that perhaps it would be better if there was never any reason for the Losers' Club to reconvene again; if they just stayed scattered to the winds and never found themselves called back to Derry to finish what they'd started.

Like he still had to finish hoeing the potato field. Mike turned back towards the house, and felt a guilty jolt of surprise as he saw that his mother was watching from the kitchen doorway. How long had she been standing there?

He trooped back over to the kitchen door with his empty glass. She took it from him but paused, her eyes searching his face. "Who was that?" she asked, with a kind of careful lightness that only made the question heavier.

"That was Beverly. She's Richie's friend." His mother had met Richie exactly once, a brief chance encounter coming out of the Discount Barn as he was passing with his folks, but Richie had a way of being memorable - and it seemed somehow important that Mike should minimise the fact that he was just as much friends with Beverly in her own right. Friends with a girl was different, even when it was *just* friends. "She just came by to tell me that he's moving out of town."

"That was good of her," his mom said, though she still wore a faintly worried frown. "But I'm not sure it's the safest thing for her to be riding all the way out here all by herself."

Mike wondered if she thought he really didn't know that she was more concerned about the trouble it might bring down on him from the neighbours than any of the dangers that could befall a girl out riding these farm roads all alone. Even with crazy old Butch Bowers and his son long gone, Mike had learned just how easy it was here in Derry and perhaps other places too for the friendly folks who thought nothing of lending a hand at harvest to turn into the friendly folks who thought nothing of raising a howling mob - and then going home to supper just as comfortably satisfied with their productive day's work either way.

But maybe growing up was realising that you had to shield your parents from just as much as they tried to keep from you... including the fact that they weren't succeeding at protecting you half as well as they might think.

It didn't make much difference anyway. "I don't think she'll be coming back," he said. Not for a long time. Not until the seven of them met again - if they ever did.

His mom picked up on his sombre mood even if she didn't realise the true cause, and gave him a soft, understanding smile as she set the lemonade glass down beside the sink. "All right, Mikey. Now, how about you take a break from that hoeing for a while and we go dress this scarecrow up?" she said.

Mike smiled back, not just at the effort to cheer him up, but at the fact that even in this encroaching adult world of tangled emotions there could still be this uncomplicated love. "Okay, Mom," he said.

He knew that whatever life the scarecrow might or might not have summoned to stalk after him when he was all alone, it would be back to being dead and dormant now. It (*IT*) wasn't strong enough yet for any more than a spot of shadowplay, painting scary pictures mostly out of his own fears.

Just as he knew that one day it would be that strong again. It wasn't dead and it wasn't gone; it was still here, still a part of the fabric of Derry.

But so was he - and he would be here, watching and waiting for that



day when the time came for the seven of them to gather again.